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INFO WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE

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SUBJECT: Algae Bloom Shrinks But Problems Remain for Lake Atitlan

REF: A) 09 GUATEMALA 1352

**¶1.** (U) Summary: Recent satellite photos from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) show that the algae bloom has shrunk since mid-November and water experts expect the bloom to disappear by the end of the year, the underlying problems will still remain and require remediation by the GoG, with the assistance of donors and civil society, as the bloom will most likely reappear next August. Inter-agency representatives have held two conference calls with Dr. Margaret Dix, a professor at Guatemala's University of the Valley and an expert on water issues at Lake Atitlan, and Dr. Eliska Rejmankova from the University of California Davis, to discuss the overall problem, progress made by the GoG to date, and the potential role for the USG. A follow-up teleconference is scheduled for mid-January. End summary.

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Algae Bloom Shrinks and is not Toxic, but Cyanobacteria Remains  
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**¶12.** (U) According to tests performed by UC-Davis, the Cyanobacteria present in Lake Atitlan is not toxic. NASA satellite images from December 1 show that the algae bloom caused by the Cyanobacteria has shrunk by approximately 30% since mid-November. This assessment matches what Dr. Dix's who forecasted that the bloom would no longer be visible within several weeks. Dr. Dix noted that the lake's temperature was a key factor in the algae's bloom, and speculated that as temperatures cool for the season, the algae would continue to disperse. Despite this aesthetic improvement, the absence of algae blooms does not correspond with a reduction in the quantity of Cyanobacteria present in the lake and Dr. Dix estimated that the bloom would return in August 2010. (NASA satellite images have been posted online ).

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USG Seeks to Provide Assistance, Collaborate with Other Donors  
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**¶13.** (SBU) Representatives from the State Department, USAID, EPA and water experts from a the University of the Valley (a Guatemalan university) and the University of California-Davis participated in conference calls on November 25 and December 10. During the calls, experts briefed the group on the nature of the problem and discussed potential ways forward. While press reports have largely focused on the dearth of water treatment facilities and the need to construct additional installations that will decrease the amount of sewage entering the lake, EPA representatives and Dr. Dix explained that this could be a faulty course of action. The sewage treatment infrastructure necessary to extract not only waste sediment, but also nitrates and phosphorous (both of which are critical in the life cycle of Cyanobacteria) is expensive and difficult to

maintain. As such, it may prove more viable to find affordable and appropriate solutions given the specifics of each project location - a process that would require patience and study. Overall, the group concluded that the GoG should not make hasty decisions, avoid costly and difficult to manage systems, and consider towns surrounding the lake separately and avoid blanket solutions.

**14.** (SBU) During the meeting November 25, Dr. Dix indicated that a Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV) working near the lake has professional experience working with water and wastewater and is providing assistance in her extra time. Dr. Dix said that the Peace Corps has agreed that the PCV will now be working with her as a primary activity. In subsequent conversations with EconOff, the Peace Corps Director corroborated this and further stated that Peace Corp Guatemala is working to identify additional PCVs that can lend technical assistance in support of this effort. Additionally, NASA's SERVIR project volunteered to host a collaborative website where all interested USG participants could post documents, questions and updated information. The group discussed USG potential to assist the GoG in narrowing options for action based on regional experience and perhaps eventually sending a team of experts to evaluate proposals that have been submitted to the GoG.

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GoG Names Point Person for Lake Atitlan, Donor Collaboration  
Critical

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**15.** (U) Group participants cited the need for donors to coordinate strongly on this issue to avoid duplication of effort and to stimulate progress. During the December 10 meeting USAID announced that the GoG had nominated Dr. Cesar Barrientos to coordinate government, donor, and civil society efforts. Dr. Dix expressed strong support for Dr. Barrientos' nomination, noting that he is an engineer and has worked extensively with members of the international community. Several participants expressed their view that his role will be critical in moving the process forward in a coherent manner. USAID also announced that the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) will lead the Donor Group on this issue and that Spain and the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB) planned to donate significant funds toward wastewater management projects. Though the numbers remain unconfirmed, a representative from IADB told Emboff that it was planning to build eight wastewater treatment plants around Lake Atitlan. In addition, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization has said it will provide USD 40,000 to support immediate action. Donors will also participate in a mapping exercise to identify resources and expertise in early-January.

**16.** (SBU) Comment: While the possible dispersion of the algae bloom may prove to be a positive development for Lake Atitlan's tourist industry (valued at approximately USD \$200 million per year), it also reduces public pressure on the GoG to take action on the issue. This could have two different results: A) Rather than implementing immediate, but less effective projects, the GoG might take advantage of a possible lack of public pressure to make more informed decisions and undertake more comprehensive and effective projects, or B) In the absence of public pressure, the GoG may elect to withhold scarce resources and rely exclusively on the donor community to fund and implement the programs necessary to achieve environmental change at Lake Atitlan. In either case, post will continue to work with the GoG and the international community to provide input and assistance. End Comment.

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